AUG 7 1981 Item 540 D GA 1.13: CED-81-118/sum.

BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL

Report To The Congress

OF THE UNITED STATES

ORIGINAL

Improving Sanitation And Federal Inspection At Slaughter Plants: How To Get Better Results For The Inspection Dollar

The Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service inspects federally approved meat and poultry slaughter plants to see that they are sanitary and that they produce wholesome, unadulterated products. GAO made surprise visits to 62 randomly selected plants in six States to test the effectiveness of the inspection program.

Service supervisors accompanying GAO rated 26 percent of the 62 plants--27 percent of the meat plants and 24 percent of the poultry plants--as unacceptable in one or more of six basic program requirements and noted numerous deficiencies not severe enough to warrant unacceptable ratings.

GAO makes several recommendations to strengthen enforcement of inspection program requirements, assure that plant managers carry out their responsibility to operate and maintain sanitary plants, and help ensure the most efficient use of Federal inspection resources.

SUMMARY

CED-81-118
JULY 30, 1981

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COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S
REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

IMPROVING SANITATION AND FEDERAL INSPECTION AT SLAUGHTER PLANTS: HOW TO GET BETTER RESULTS FOR THE INSPECTION DOLLAR

D I G E S T

Inspectors from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service monitor meat and poultry slaughter plants doing business in interstate commerce to make sure that plant operations are sanitary and that products are wholesome, unadulterated, and properly marked.

GAO made this review to evaluate how well the inspectors were carrying out their responsibilities, whether plant managers were complying with inspection program requirements, and how efficiently the Department was using its inspection resources.

Assisted by Service supervisors, GAO made unannounced visits to 62 randomly selected meat and poultry slaughter plants in six States to evaluate plant and inspection staff compliance with inspection program requirements. Sixteen, or 26 percent, of the plants--27 percent of the meat plants and 24 percent of the poultry plants--were not in compliance with one or more of the six basic inspection program requirements. (See pp. 5 and 7.)

Eleven plants were unacceptable in sanitation, 7 in pest control, 4 in controls over condemned and inedible materials, 2 in ante mortem and post mortem inspection, and 1 in water supply potability. All plants were acceptable in sewage and waste disposal. (See p. 9.)

Based on the results at the 62 plants, GAO estimates that 44, or 18.4 percent, of the 238 plants sampled in the six States--181 meat plants in four States and 57 poultry plants in two States--do not acceptably comply with one or more inspection program requirements. Further, 24.9 percent of the meat and poultry slaughtered in those 238 plants comes from plants unacceptable in one or more requirements. (See p. 7.)

The high incidence of unacceptable ratings and the large number of deficiencies found at plants not bad enough to warrant unacceptable

ratings show that both plant managers and inspection program staff are not fully meeting their responsibilities. (See p. 9.)

SANITATION PROBLEMS

Of the 62 randomly selected plants, 18 percent received unacceptable sanitation ratings. The majority of the remaining plants had numerous sanitation deficiencies that the reviewers did not consider serious enough to warrant unacceptable ratings but which indicated that inspectors and plant managers were not fully carrying out their responsibilities. In some cases plant managers appeared to rely extensively on inspectors to identify sanitation problems rather than having their own controls over sanitation.

Some of the sanitation deficiencies noted were

--condensation dripping on, and thereby contaminating, carcasses;

--very dirty overhead structures and equipment;

--dead flies on work surfaces that meat contacts; and

--meat dragging through dirty drip trays.

In some cases, the deficiencies were due to inadequate cleanup from the prior day's work. In other cases, the deficiencies were more long term. (See pp. 11 to 16.)

PEST CONTROL

The seven plants with unacceptable pest control programs had rodent, insect, or insecticide problems. Rodent problems existed in storage rooms and buildings and in maintenance areas. Some plants had fly or other insect problems inside and outside. One plant had inadequate controls to assure that insecticides were used properly. (See p. 17.)

WATER SYSTEM PROBLEMS

Only one plant received an unacceptable water supply rating. However, 39, or 63 percent, of the 62 random sample plants had water system deficiencies that could result in contamination of the plants' potable water supplies. These deficiencies included improper cross-connections

between potable and nonpotable waterlines and inadequate back-siphonage protection. (See pp. 21 and 22.)

ACCEPTANCE TESTING PROGRAMS OF QUESTIONABLE VALUE

The Service's acceptance testing programs for cattle and poultry carcasses are ineffective because they are not being conducted as designed. The programs were designed as statistically valid random sampling programs, whereby sample results would be indicative of slaughter dressing defects (such as grease, hair, or bruises) of the universe sampled. However, inspection and plant personnel carrying out the programs invalidate them by substantially deviating from the prescribed sampling plans and methods. (See pp. 24 to 29.)

ANTE MORTEM AND POST MORTEM INSPECTIONS AND CONTROLS OVER CONDEMNED AND INEDIBLE PRODUCTS

Ante mortem and post mortem inspections and controls to assure that condemned and inedible products are not sold as edible products were generally adequate. However, some deficiencies existed in plant facilities and equipment and in inspection procedures. (See pp. 31 to 40.)

Service inspectors devote a significant portion of post mortem inspection time to examining meat carcasses for dressing defects (the presence of contamination or unwholesome or inedible parts) that plants failed to remove. The plants, not the inspectors, should be responsible for checking for dressing defects. (See pp. 37 and 38.)

INSPECTION STAFF SHORTAGES

During 1980 from 6 percent to 10 percent of the Service's slaughter inspection positions were unfilled. As of February 21, 1981, the Service had a shortage of about 7 percent among its authorized 5,995 slaughter plant inspectors. The shortages were due to hiring and budget restrictions.

Because of these shortages, certain inspection responsibilities had been neglected, including supervising line inspectors, performing

acceptance tests, monitoring plant conditions and operations, and inspecting processing departments. (See pp. 42 to 45.)

BETTER MONITORING NEEDED

The deficiencies at the randomly selected slaughter plants show that Service supervisors need to better monitor plant and inspection staff compliance with program requirements. One problem is the lack of adequate guidance to supervisors as to what constitutes an acceptable level of compliance. (See pp. 47 to 50.)

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE

To better assure that meat and poultry plants produce only wholesome and unadulterated products, the Secretary should direct the Service, among other things, to:

--Strengthen its enforcement of sanitation requirements. (See p. 18.)

--Require plant managers to fulfill their responsibilities for operating and maintaining plants in a sanitary manner through a system of financial disincentives. Imposing some disincentives, such as levying fines, would require the Secretary to obtain legislative authority. (See pp. 18 and 19.)

--Initiate a special one-time effort to identify and correct water system deficiencies and take action to prevent recurrences. (See p. 23.)

--Revise, and require that Service inspection staff follow, procedures governing the quality acceptance testing program. (See p. 30.)

--Make improvements governing inspection of edible and inedible meat and poultry products. (See pp. 40 and 41.)

--Take actions to assure more effective monitoring of meat and poultry inspection activity. (See p. 51.)

AGENCY COMMENTS

Department of Agriculture officials who provided oral comments on a draft of this report expressed concern about whether a system of financial disincentives for plants not complying with inspection requirements could be equitably administered and whether such a system could be effective. GAO believes that the system could be equitably administered if done at a high level, such as by regional directors, and that it could provide an effective enforcement tool, short of withdrawing inspection, to deal with plants having serious or regular sanitation problems. (See p. 19.)

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ABBREVIATIONS

FSIS	Food Safety and Inspection Service
GAO	General Accounting Office
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture